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Book Events in Fargo and Ellendale are Part of Long Term Regional Literary Project

by Ken Smith

“For the first 60 some years we averaged one book year, until 2015. Since then we’ve been doing six to ten books per year.” On March 5, Suzzanne Kelley, editor-in-chief of NDSU Press, presided over her organization’s fifth annual Press Party” at the McGovern Center on the NDSU campus. Suzzanne and her husband, Professor Tom Isern, are frequent guests and presenters in Ellendale. Last November they were at the Opera House for the third annual North Dakota Book Festival. That event featured a full slate of top regional authors and was accompanied by several writing workshops. Like the press party, the Book Festival in Ellendale is part of a vision that Suzzanne and Tom have of building a positive, historically grounded literary identity for our region.

The Press Party marked the 70th anniversary of the NDSU-related publishing house, which began in 1950 with the mission of interpreting our part of the country both for its residents and for interested outsiders. Mike Jacobs, retired editor of the *Grand Forks Herald* who values this mission highly, has called NDSU Press “the gem of the whole university System.”

The recent productivity of the nonprofit publisher is remarkable. All of these NDSU Press books are directly relevant to North Dakota life and culture. They are part of a broader project to provide our state and region with its own authentic literary voice. For Suzzanne and Tom, it is important that our history and culture be known and understood in all its aspects. They want it to be interpreted by people who actually grew up here and live here, and not imposed from outside by writers or intellectuals who don’t share a common history and appreciation for our uniqueness.

The new crop of NDSU Press books, presented at the Press Party, was headlined by Terry L. Shoptaugh of Moorehead State University, discussing his new book *Sons of the Wild Jackass: The Nonpartisan League in North Dakota*. The book is of special interest because of ongoing debates about government organization, and because the Nonpartisan League had a long history in Dickey County, particularly around the Forbes area. One of Ellendale’s favorite sons, Fred J. Graham, after whom the Graham Library on the TBC campus was named, was one of the leading players in the NPL in the 1920s and 1930s.

Shoptaugh was followed by Robert Seabloom, Professor Emeritus at UND, whose recent work *The Mammals of North Dakota* provides the most extensive survey of our state’s mammals, including those that are hunted each fall. Seabloom said that deeply understanding a place requires that one have a working knowledge of the creatures that live there, not just the humans who occupy it.

Brian Bedard, Emeritus Professor at the University of South Dakota, presented his book *Girl On a Float*, a book of stories about actual individuals living on the Northern plains. “These are,” he said, “flesh and blood human beings” who have “the necessary virtues-patience, courage, creativity, loyalty to the land, responsibility, discipline, and independence. They have heart, they have humility, they have faith. And they get it from having to respect and pay attention to the physical world, their dwelling place.” North Dakotan Nick Bertelson, a man with decades of farming and ranching experience, presented his poetry collection *Harvest Widows*, entertaining the crowd with dry but captivating (and sometimes hilarious) poetic observations that could be fully appreciated by people who have experienced the rigors of rural life.

Perhaps the most stirring presentation was by Denise Lajimodiere, who read quietly from her book *Stringing Rosaries: The History, the Unforgivable, and the Healing of Northern Plains American Indian Boarding School Survivors*. Denise spent many years interviewing people, including her own father, who as children had been taken from their homes, often by force, and placed in regimented boarding schools where they experienced a harsh induction into a new and strange



Top: Denise Lajimodiere at the podium with displays for this year's NDSU Press books on either side; Professor Tom Isern greeting guests before reading from *Pacing Dakota* and singing lines from classic Great Plains songs; Suzzanne Kelley's license plate seen through the window of the Ellendale Opera House; Bill Caraher (editor of the UND Digital Press), at the 2019 press party, discussing his book on the Bakken oil region. *Photos by Ken Smith*

culture. They often experienced severe punishments, and for most, their time at the school represented a systematic degradation of their tribal traditions and identities. Denise mentioned the concept of “historical trauma” which she says is evident in dysfunctional family life and poor individual adjustment, which are common among the children and grandchildren of those taken from their families and sent to boarding schools. A major theme of *Stringing Rosaries* is the necessity of forgiveness, which she believes requires a genuine understanding of what happened and why. Denise believes that Native American communities in our region share a conflicted past with the majority culture, but that mutual understanding holds long-term benefits for our future as a whole. Her book and its importance will be discussed at length in an upcoming Leader essay.

The most unusual book discussed at the NDSU event was not a print book at all, but the audiobook version of Tom Isern’s 2018 *Pacing Dakota*, which he has presented on two occasions at Ellendale. *Pacing Dakota* has captivating stories from people he has met and observations he has made in the last three decades as he has traveled every part of our state. “I have a face for radio,” Tom said humbly.

But those who have heard Tom Isern read his weekly *Plains Folk* essays Prairie Public Radio will know that he has a powerfully expressive recording voice. The new audiobook, which he narrates, is a first for NDSU Press, and has been very well received.

The prospects for maintaining a high output of substantial, high quality works is excellent. “When I first came to the Press we were getting eight to eleven manuscripts per year, said Suzzanne. “Now we are getting far over 100 every year.” Professor emeritus Robert Wood has been helping with the selection process, which is time consuming and requires much foresight.

The process of promoting these books, and calling attention to their purpose and importance, is also bearing much fruit. Suzzanne and Tom are already discussing ideas for the Fourth Annual North Dakota Book Festival at the Historic Ellendale Opera House. As before, it will be in late October or Early November. Anyone in Ellendale or surrounding communities who is interested in serving on a planning group for the event should contact Ken Smith at the *Leader* Office or call 701-320-2794.

Uncertainty about COVID-19 conditions in the next few months have not stopped (or even slowed) Suzzanne and Tom’s ambitions for developing a genuine North Dakota literary tradition. They are convinced that these recently published books, and many others yet to come, can remind us of who we are, where we are, and why our life here is special. And when “social distancing” is no longer required, they’ll be back on the road again, visiting the people and places they love, including Ellendale.